

## NARCISSE HUPIER: A RELUCTANT BUT FAITHFUL RELIGIOUS

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On July 4, 1873, Father Narcisse Hupier, C.S.C., the pastor of St. Thomas Parish in Memramcook, New Brunswick, died. He was sixty-three years old and had arrived at the parish from France by way of Montreal only ten months before. When news of his death was telegraphed to Saint-Laurent, the seat of the Holy Cross provincial administration in Canada, word came back that his body was to be shipped to Saint-Laurent for burial in the community cemetery and appropriate arrangements were made. The sources provide few details of what happened next but they say that as the wagon with Hupier's coffin was on the way to the railroad station, it was stopped by a group of Acadian men who unloaded the coffin and carried it away. In fact, they took Hupier's body back to St. Thomas church and hid it in the basement where it remained for the next seven years.<sup>1</sup> Therein lies a story.

Narcisse Hupier was born March 13, 1810, in Fresnay-sur-Sarthe in the diocese of Le Mans. Ordained in 1833, he served for one year as a vicar in the parish of Montbizot. Then, in 1834 he was assigned to assist Father Jacques Dujarié with the Brothers of St. Joseph, first as their chaplain at the novitiate and then at Ruillé. When Dujarié confided the direction of the Brothers to Basile Moreau in August 1835, Hupier moved with them to Le Mans where he joined Moreau's Auxiliary Priests.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Proust, C.S.C., "Hupier, Narcisse," *Sainte-Croix en France: Les peres* (Paris, 1980), 30; Maurice Chamard, C.S.C., Anselme Chiasson, capuchin, Clément Cormier, C.S.C., and Hector Léger, C.S.C., *le Père Camille Lefebvre, c.s.c.* (Montréal: Fides, 1988), 118.

<sup>2</sup> Proust, 30.

A kind and gentle man, Hupier could not be used as a teacher at Sainte-Croix because he was too indulgent with the students. The Catta brothers say of him, “his voice was too soft, his eyes too kindly, and his soul too tender.” Hupier is further described by the Cattas as “an ardent soul” who thrived in the work of preaching parish missions. “He spoke very simply ... but with a tone of conviction which won all hearts and with a kindness which knew no limits. Just his sign of the cross was a sermon in itself.” When he preached a parish mission, he hardly ever left the parish church, remaining either in the confessional or at the foot of the altar, forgetting often to take food. When this adversely effected his health, he professed himself “fortunate to have worked so hard for the welfare of souls.”<sup>3</sup>

At Sainte-Croix, Hupier served as director of postulants several times and as socius or companion of the novices. He regularly celebrated Mass both at the Solitude of St. Joseph and at the Good Shepherd convent, each one a hike of two to three kilometers from Sainte-Croix. From the time that he first came to assist Dujarié, he had shared with the Brothers his personal resources.<sup>4</sup>

Narcisse Hupier was somewhat austere in manner. He did not enjoy conversation but he never criticized anyone. He never had heat in his room. He was transported with joy to know that his confreres were called to the foreign missions, although he did not believe that that was his calling. His zeal found an outlet in his homeland, France. As one by one the Auxiliary Priests began to either profess religious vows as Moreau had done or withdraw from the band of missionaries, Hupier faced a dilemma. He admired Moreau and was devoted to the Brothers, but he had misgivings about religious life. A true apostle, eager to acquire perfection and a man of

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<sup>3</sup> Étienne Catta and Tony Catta, *Basil Anthony Mary Moreau*, English translation by Edward L. Heston, C.S.C., 2 volumes (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1955), II: 73-74.

<sup>4</sup> Proust, 30.

upright character, he found it difficult to comply with the rules and was not keen on community life. Eventually, Father Moreau's kindness and patience with him won him over, and he professed vows in 1843.<sup>5</sup>

As a religious of Holy Cross, Hupier has been described as one who spent his day scrupulously following the exercises prescribed in the Rule. He did not make visits outside of the house and it was said of him that if he could not be found in his room, then he could certainly be found in the chapel. The one complaint against him was that he celebrated Mass rather slowly. In the spirit of poverty, he mended his own clothes and at table always took the least attractive morsels.<sup>6</sup>

Hupier won a reputation as a preacher of missions and the places where he preached, especially the country parishes, became attached to him. In 1857, a pastor of the diocese wrote to Father Moreau about a mission that Hupier had preached in his parish:

Really, he succeeded far beyond my expectations. His sanctity, added to his instructions, which were overflowing with charity for sinners and on fire with love of God, brought back to a sense of their duties a good number of backsliders for whom I did not even have any hope.

In 1859, he and four other Holy Cross priests preached a mission in Reims, the cathedral city east of Paris where the kings of France were traditionally crowned. Preaching seems to have been his principal ministry in the years following his profession and he appears to have been effective at it.<sup>7</sup>

Hupier drew little attention in the sources during the 1860s, when Father Moreau was undergoing the trials and attacks that eventually forced him to resign as superior general in

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<sup>5</sup> Proust, 30; Cattas, II:73-74.

<sup>6</sup> Cattas, II: 75.

<sup>7</sup> Cattas, II:,74-75; Proust, 30.

1866.<sup>8</sup> One source says that he remained in Le Mans until the last days of Moreau's life.<sup>9</sup> possibly the only Holy Cross religious to do so, but this seems unlikely. In October 1869, Hupier left Le Mans when he was named spiritual director of the Congregation's house at La Faye, an agricultural and trade school.<sup>10</sup>

In 1868, when the leaders of the French Province went to Rome for the extraordinary general chapter of that year, Hupier had been left in charge of the college at Sainte-Croix. As the chapter grappled with the events of recent years that had led to Father Moreau's resignation as superior general, the files at Sainte-Croix, especially the financial records, were an embarrassment to those who had worked to force Moreau out of office. They sent word back to Hupier to gather the documents of the Congregation, "all the papers, records, articles, the archives, which had already been put in a sealed box before the departure of the capitulants for Rome, and to add to all this whatever might have remained on the desks or the shelves of the secretariate." When he had done so, he was to turn over the whole collection to the chancery of the Le Mans diocese. The order added, "It is hardly necessary to tell you that this transfer must be carried out with extreme prudence."<sup>11</sup>

Hupier responded by giving this collection to Father Moreau. He wrote on the back of the order from Rome that he felt it his duty to turn everything over to the Father Founder.<sup>12</sup> As a further gesture of respect for the founder, Hupier then proceeded to invite Moreau to preside over the distribution of prizes at the college at the end of the school year.<sup>13</sup> Thus did all the

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<sup>8</sup> See James Connelly, C.S.C., *Basile Moreau and the Congregation of Holy Cross* (Portland, Oregon: The University of Portland, Garaventa Center for Catholic Intellectual Life and American culture, 2007), 59-76, for a summary of events in these years.

<sup>9</sup> Cattas, II: 76, note 44.

<sup>10</sup> Proust, 31.

<sup>11</sup> Cattas, II: 812.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, II: 812-813.

<sup>13</sup> Proust, 30.

documents that Father Charles Moreau would use to compose his 1899 biography of his uncle, Basile Moreau, pass into the possession of the founder and his nephew.<sup>14</sup>

La Faye would not be Hupier's last assignment. In 1872, when he was 62 and in poor health, Father Sorin, the superior general, assigned him to Canada to serve as superior of St. Joseph's College in Memramcook, New Brunswick, an obedience which he accepted in a spirit of faith.

May the holy and ever lovable will of God be done! I desire nothing more than to accomplish it. It is in accomplishing it that one finds peace and that one sanctifies oneself....I will be happy if I can say when I die: My God I have always done your will.<sup>15</sup>

Hupier arrived in Montreal and spent some time at the novitiate of the Canadian Province at Côte-des-Neiges before moving to New Brunswick. There he encountered a young novice, Brother André Bessette, on whom he made a lasting impression. Brother André held Hupier's memory in great veneration and after his death he declared,

Father Hupier appeared to me in a dream, and I asked him which prayer is the most pleasing to God. He recited the 'Our Father' three times and then added, 'You must repeat Thy will be done!' From this I concluded that I would have to undergo great difficulties.<sup>16</sup>

The 700-mile trip by train to New Brunswick must have been exhausting for Hupier. When he arrived in Memramcook, he learned that he would not be the superior of the college but the pastor of the parish. He also learned that he was to accompany Bishop Rogers of St. John, New Brunswick, on an exploratory visit to the northwestern corner of his diocese to survey an area that the bishop proposed to entrust to Holy Cross priests for mission work. The bishop had wanted Father Camille Lefebvre, the founder of St. Joseph's College in Memramcook, to

<sup>14</sup> Connelly, 79-83, relates the sequence of events by which these documents returned to the possession of the Congregation.

<sup>15</sup> Proust, 31; Chamard, 117.

<sup>16</sup> Laurent Boucher, C.S.C., *Brother André: The Miracle Man of Mount Royal* (Montreal: St. Joseph's Oratory, 1997), 34.

accompany him but Lefebvre had been elected provincial by the general chapter of 1872 and was not available. Hupier was sent instead.<sup>17</sup>

The area in question was Madawaska County, New Brunswick, in the northwestern corner of the province where Quebec, New Brunswick and the State of Maine come together. The inhabitants were not numerous and they were scattered over many miles. Logging was the mainstay of the economy. The priests assigned to this mission would have to be hardy souls, able to endure the hardships of life in a frontier setting. Hupier's poor health would not permit him to be one of them, but others undertook this mission in the years following.<sup>18</sup>

During the winter of 1872-73, Hupier fell dangerously ill at Memramcook. In the parish, his concern for the poor and his generosity continued to show themselves. He had received a small inheritance which he used, with his superior's permission, to buy clothing for parishioners who did not come to church because they lacked suitable clothing. In May 1873, Fr. Sorin gave him a new obedience. He was to move to Indiana to pastor several groups of French-Canadians in the vicinity of the University of Notre Dame. He accepted the new assignment with his customary spirit of submission and obedience, as he indicated in a letter to Father Sorin:

I received your good letter this morning with great pleasure. May the holy and amiable will of God, which is so clearly manifested in your letter be done. I shall be happy, very happy, to do this will as soon as possible and to procure the glory of our adorable Master.

But he was too sick to travel, a fact that he did not seem to understand. As he wrote to Father Sorin in May 1873:

I must tell you that in his great mercy God has sent me a sickness. This is a great grace which He has granted me. I have thanked Him for it, and I thank Him still. I accept it with all my heart for as long as He wants it to last.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Chamard, 117.

<sup>18</sup> Clément Cormier, C.S.C., "Ministère Paroissial des Pères de Sainte-Croix au Nouveau-Brunswick," *Analecta* (Montreal), volume II, Number 2 (December 1947): 177-182.

<sup>19</sup> Cattas, II:1016-1017.

Hupier never went to Indiana. He died two months later.

For a man who had doubts that he could live the religious life in Holy Cross and who was not inclined to bear the crosses of community life, Narcisse Hupier left behind a reputation for holiness on both counts that was recognized by his confrères in the congregation as well as by the parishioners in Memramcook who had known him for less than a year. They were not going to let the remains of such a holy man be taken away from them and if that meant stealing his coffin and hiding it until Hupier could be buried among them, then so be it. In 1880, when a Holy Cross community cemetery was established at Memramcook, Hupier's body was brought out of hiding and interred in the new burial ground. The holy man stayed among his people.